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Leadership in Christian Higher Education

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Wright, M., & Arthur, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Leadership in Christian higher education*.

Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic.

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone, George Fox University

Having studied and experienced Christian higher education for over 15 years, it was with some excitement (in a nerdy way) that I picked up this volume. While I did not recognize the editors, the volume looked intriguing. Having heard the thoughts and reflections of North American scholars and educators on leadership topics, I was looking forward to the insights of those from international venues. I was intrigued and hoped that this book might provide a new perspective on what it means to be a follower of Jesus within higher education, particularly at the top leadership levels.

The volume is a compilation of reflections from scholars and administrators who share the common commitment toward higher education with an Anglican or Episcopal flavor. Further, the bulk of the reflections are tied to personal experiences through the distinctive nature of higher education within the British system. The international flavor arises as the authors reflect on challenges and blessings of maneuvering through institutional connections with the Anglican Church in various parts of the world.

Each writer is currently or has been the primary leader at one or more institution of higher education. Therefore, it is a series of reflections and challenges by men and women who have served as chief executive officers for universities associated with Church of England or the Episcopal Church. Each has also sought to be a faithful follower of Jesus. The compelling part of this book is that they represent regions and institutions from Africa, North America, India, New Zealand, and England. They provide broad insights with varied experiences. However, they generally limit themselves to thoughts on their own academic journeys and provide insights on what they have encountered or faced as principals or vice-chancellors (or *presidents* in the American and Canadian context).

Their common assertion is that no matter how an institution's demographics unfold, if it desires to maintain a Christian or denominational role to its character, its primary leader must be a faithful follower of Jesus. This person must be committed to justice, integrity, and faithfulness. Having this type of principled leadership will permeate the ethos of the institution. Therefore examining how a vice-chancellor faithfully lives out his or her leading of an institution becomes one of the focuses of the collection. Writing in a way to challenge those reflecting and desiring leadership at a college or university, the authors try to demonstrate faithful diligence in the counsel and challenge they provide.

James Arthur, professor of Education and Civic Engagement at University of Birmingham, identifies the current concern facing higher education leadership. He observes that often the pressures of society negate the mission of a faith-based institution. "...what we see is an academic leadership that too often subscribes to the safe course of allowing political expediency to dictate mission and policy which has resulted in a secularization that is erasing their *raison d'être*" (p. 9). This inevitably creates an ambiguity in terms of both purpose and identity.

In an attempt to clarify the purpose of a Christian institution, South African Gerald Pilay, past Vice-Chancellor at Liverpool Hope University College, suggests that a “Christian education nurtures a liberal education that is an education for freedom. It is unfettered freedom hence faith, philosophy and science... nurtured alongside each other. If it is goal directed then its purpose is to produce the rounded citizen with a global sense... the Christian foundation also hopes that its scholarly efforts will help create a humane society” (p. 56).

But intent is not sufficient for a Christian institution to stand as distinctive. Beyond the vision and purpose of an institution, Dame Janet Trotter, former principal of the College of St. Paul and St. Mary, observes that: “The Vice Chancellor and the senior team always need to act in the light of the Christian values espoused, devolving power, developing healthy relations, seeking organic sustainable growth and fostering corporate responsibility: in effect... providing opportunities for God’s grace to flow through its life and work” (p. 76). They must be faithful men and women.

Then Michael Wright, Vice Chancellor of the Canterbury Christ Church University, reflects on the shaping impact that the faith of a president has on an institution: “... without the committed (Christian) leadership which only a chief executive and autonomous and appropriately constituted governing body can provide, the Christian purposes of an institution will be at risk” (p. 87). The counsel provided by these writers was like the advice given by a mentor.

Beyond the text, technically, there seemed to be limited editing. Letting authors stand alone has merit. But there were no discernable threads and little cohesion that pulled this volume together into a whole. It was disjointed and disappointing. This work has some good personal counsel but little insight into the growing conversation around the philosophy and ethos of Christian higher education.

Because of the diversity of the authors, I was hoping for a broad perspective on Christian international higher education. As stated above, the book focused primarily on church- or denominationally-related institutions, so the hoped-for breadth was limited. While church-related colleges are part of Christian higher education, this focus was much narrower than the title suggests. Candidly, this collection of essays should not have suggested that it was examining leadership in Christian higher education; more accurately, it focuses solely on executive leadership within Anglican higher education. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

David M. Johnstone serves as the Associate Dean of Students at George Fox University. He holds a Master of Arts from Providence Theological Seminary.